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FBI's Webster is nominated to direct CIA

Senators praise
'integrity, ability'
of latest appointee

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WASHINGTON — President Reagan nominated FBI Director William H. Webster to be the new director of central intelligence yesterday, a day after withdrawing the name of his previous choice, Robert M. Gates, in the face of congressional opposition and controversy over his role in the Iran arms deal.

Mr. Webster, a former federal appeals court judge who has boosted the FBI's role in fighting drugs, espionage and terrorism in the years since he was appointed by President Carter in 1978, will replace the ailing William J. Casey, who resigned the CIA post after surgery to remove a brain tumor.

In a prepared statement last night, the president said of Mr. Webster: "Bill is well known as a man of honor and integrity, as a man who is committed to the rule of law, and as a professional who is dedicated to the pursuit of excellence."

Mr. Reagan telephoned the FBI chief to offer him the job at 10:20 a.m., White House spokesman Marlin Fitzwater said.

Mr. Webster "said he wanted some time to consider this" and called back shortly after 6 p.m. to accept, the spokesman said.

No selection of a new FBI director has been made.

The choice drew immediate praise from the chairman and vice chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, which will act first on confirming Mr. Webster to the new post.

In a joint statement, Sens. David L. Boren, D-Okla., the chairman, and William S. Cohen, R-Maine, said that Mr. Webster was widely respected "both for his high standards



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WILLIAM H. WEBSTER
Director of the FBI

of personal integrity as well as for his professional ability," and that his experience as a judge "gives him a deep understanding of the law and the appropriate roles of the agencies of government."

Mr. Cohen told reporters that the panel would certainly question the appointee about consenting to a request by Attorney General Edwin W. Meese III to suspend, temporarily, an FBI probe into arms shipments to the contras.

But "barring some remarkable revelation, I would expect [Mr. Webster to] achieve quick confirmation," Mr. Cohen said.

The Justice Department has said that the request to suspend the FBI probe followed a call last October from former National Security Adviser John M. Poindexter to Mr. Meese.

Admiral Poindexter, who later resigned over his role in the Iran-contra affair, told Mr. Meese that the investigation threatened a mission then under way to free American hostages in Beirut, Lebanon, Justice officials said at the time.

The probe, later resumed, focused on the activities of Southern

Air Transport, a firm linked to the Iran arms sales as well as the supplying of arms to Nicaraguan rebels.

Mr. Cohen said he expected that Mr. Webster would handle questions on the episode satisfactorily.

The FBI chief later was in touch with Mr. Meese about the Justice Department's preliminary inquiry into the Iran arms deals, the inquiry that uncovered the alleged diversion of the arms deals' proceeds to the contras.

Mr. Meese told the Senate intelligence committee that as the inquiry was getting under way, he "discussed the Iran matter with [Mr. Webster and] . . . he and Webster agreed that, as there was no criminal matter involved, it would not be appropriate to bring in the FBI."

The attorney general launched a full-scale probe the following week, however, after disclosing the Iran-contra connection. There was some criticism at the time that the FBI might have been brought in too late to secure all needed evidence.

Before his nomination was announced, Mr. Webster testified to the Senate Judiciary Committee yesterday that the United States should consider kidnapping terrorists abroad to bring them to this country for trial.

In recent years, fighting terrorism has been one of Mr. Webster's chief objectives at the FBI, which has reported a sharp reduction in terrorist incidents in major U.S. cities.

The bureau, which investigated some recent, highly publicized spy cases, also has expanded its effort to combat espionage and joined with state officials in cracking down on organized crime.

Mr. Webster was offered the CIA job after it was turned down by former Sen. John G. Tower, R-Texas, whose commission produced an acclaimed and highly critical report on the Iran-contra affair, a senior administration official said last night.

Before Mr. Gates was nominated, Howard H. Baker Jr., who is now White House chief of staff, had been approached.

Mr. Gates, who will resume as deputy director of the CIA, came under fire in the Senate for not acting forcefully enough on early CIA suspicions that Iran arms sale profits were being diverted to help arm the contras, and was questioned about his role in preparing incomplete testimony given by Mr. Casey.

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Karen Hosler contributed to this article.